

Hawaii governor: US Jews shift to Right

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The situation in Israel has pushed American Jewry significantly to the Right, which means more Jews will vote Republican in this year's presidential elections than ever before, Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle told The Jerusalem Post Friday while on her first trip to Israel.

Herself a Jewish Republican, Lingle has her biases. But as a moderate, she knows that party ideology has its limits.

"I think there's been a big shift, and it's because of Israel and President Bush's support for Israel. While they may not agree with the president on a variety of things, and I don't agree with him on everything, the bottom line is he's a great friend of Israel, certainly among the closest to Israel of any president America has ever had," she said. "You may be a Democrat by your political orientation, but you have to agree that President Bush is supporting Israel at a very difficult time to support Israel, when our European allies are not being supportive, and yet he's willing to stand up for the country."

She's cautiously optimistic that Bush will prevail in November after a close contest. "Cautiously optimistic" is also how she characterized Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's views on his campaign to push through his revised Gaza disengagement plan as expressed to her during a conversation held during her stay.

She declined to "be presumptuous" and offer her views on the plan or other Israeli political issues, but she did note her admiration for the hopefulness that pervaded most comments she heard from Israeli officials.

"What has struck me in talking to people is their ability to remain optimistic in a very difficult and seemingly unsolvable situation," she said.

"When you think about what people have achieved in such a short period of time, it's remarkable. So I can see why they could remain optimistic, because if you look at their history and what they've achieved, nobody would ever believe it."

Lingle pointed to universities, medical facilities, and artistic achievements, some of which she got to see first-hand during her trip. She also took care of some business, signing a memorandum of understanding with the Agriculture Ministry on behalf of her state, allowing the two entities to share technology on issues ranging from water conservation to agricultural biotechnology to aquaculture.

"We felt that Israel and Hawaii had a lot in common economically because tourism, agriculture, the military, and technology are the same components of our economy," she said of the impulse to forge a pact together. "We also thought that we share an isolation. Our isolation is created by water and Israel's is created by having neighbors who aren't friendly, and so Israel has to achieve success based on its own resources, natural resources, human resources, and Hawaii has to do the same thing."

But some of the impetus was personal, sprung from the well of Lingle's own past and convictions. The 50-year-old politician can still remember the cardboard sheets, complete with illustrations of trees and

semi-circle cut-outs for dimes, that she and her Sunday school friends would use to collect spare change to pay for the Jewish National Fund to plant trees in Israel.

When she arrived in Israel on Monday, the first thing she did was plant a sapling herself.

"This is the first time I've been in a place where almost everyone is Jewish," she noted. "I don't know the exact word to describe it, but it's a good feeling."

Hawaii boasts only 10,000 Jews among its population of 1.2 million.

Since her election in November – giving the state its first female, first Republican, and, of course, first Jewish chief executive – Judaism has received significantly more attention than ever before in the Christian and Buddhist-dominated locale.

The hosting of Pessah Seders in the capitol and this very trip to Israel, for example, have raised the religion's profile.

And Lingle's faith has raised her profile.

"I didn't expect it, but Jewish people all across the country know about me and are proud," she said. "They don't care what party I'm in. They don't care what my position is on a particular issue is. They just are proud I'm Jewish and I'm the governor of a state."



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